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IMPLEMENTING THE STRENGTHENING FAMILIES APPROACH – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOS ANGELES COUNTY

On March 29, 2011, your Board adopted the updated Child Care Policy Framework and directed the Office of Child Care to report back on various topics. This report addresses how the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (IDCFS) and partner organizations implemented the Strengthening Families approach to reduce child abuse and neglect.

Convened by IDCFS, Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI) includes over 40 State and community partners. SFI has been in place since 2005 and has amassed a number of significant accomplishments. This report focuses on four areas of particular interest for stakeholders in Los Angeles County:

- School Readiness Initiative – Recognizing the importance of being ready for school and the particular challenges that young children in the child welfare system face, IDCFS defined “early education” as an entitlement for all three to five year old children in foster care. Current practice is to ensure that every child between three to five years of age in foster care is enrolled and attending a high quality early learning program.
- SFI Learning Networks – Over 100 child development centers are involved in ongoing professional development designed to improve their services to children

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and families. Many of these trainings are designed to accommodate both child welfare caseworkers and child development program staff.

- Parent Leadership in Communities – SFI enlisted an advertising firm to work with parents to translate the Protective Factors into “straightforward language.” The five Protective Factors are positive attributes which, when present, are linked to lower incidence of child abuse and neglect. The effort to tailor the messages to parents contributed to the successful engagement of parents through the SFI Parent Cafés.
- Family Advocacy Centers – IDCFS has funded 14 community based organizations to empower and support families as they navigate the child welfare system.

These programs are explored more fully in the attached document.

The Strengthening Families approach has succeeded in reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect. This approach holds promise for the children and families in Los Angeles County.

Section F of the attached report includes five recommendations for how Los Angeles County could begin the process of integrating this approach into the practice models of selected County departments and guide our work with community partners.

Should your staff have questions regarding the content of the report, they can contact Kathy House, Assistant Chief Executive Officer, at (213) 974-4530.

WTF:KH
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Attachments

c: Executive Office, Board of Supervisors
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Strengthening Families Illinois: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Los Angeles County

A. Introduction

In 2010, the Illinois Department of Children and Families (IDCFS) fielded 109,186 reports of child abuse. Investigations of those reports revealed credible evidence of abuse or neglect in 28,968 cases. The volume of this caseload – which is comparable to that managed by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services – represents incalculable trauma to thousands of young children and their families, a significant cost to the public sector, and a challenging work load for IDCFS.

Mr. Erwin McEwen, Director of IDCFS, is committed to changing the reality and the perception of IDCFS from the entity “that takes your kids away” to an organization that can “help and support parents who are stressed and struggling to meet the needs of their children”.¹ In his remarks to the Strengthening Families Leadership Summit, Mr. McEwen stated:

“DCFS should not be in the business of raising children, but in the business of strengthening families.”²

The process of transforming IDCFS has involved community partners and parents, and has been guided by the principles of the Strengthening Families approach and the promotion of the Protective Factors.

The Strengthening Families approach caught the attention of Illinois and 36 other states, as well as philanthropic organizations, public and community-based service providers in Los Angeles County. The LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment is a champion of Strengthening Families. First 5 LA adopted the Strengthening Families approach prior to implementing its Partnerships for Families (PFF) initiative and has actively incorporated these principles and activities into its strategies for preventing child maltreatment. The Strengthening Families approach has influenced the work of the Education Coordinating Council, most notably the Council’s focus on early childhood education. The Magnolia Place Community Initiative is “designed to nurture the child, strengthen the family and build a caring community.”³ Within a number of County departments, the Strengthening Families approach is informing the design and implementation of services.

Could service providers in Los Angeles County realize better outcomes by making an intentional commitment to integrate the Strengthening Families approach into their work with children, families and communities? The goals outlined by Strengthening Families Illinois and the lessons learned over the past six years suggest that substantial and positive change is possible when the public, private and philanthropic sectors work collaboratively to integrate the Strengthening Families approach into their practice models.

This document begins with a brief description of the Strengthening Families approach. The next section describes how IDCFS, in collaboration with community partners, integrated the Strengthening Families approach into four program areas. The final section is devoted to recommendations for integrating the Strengthening Families approach into our work with children and families in Los Angeles County.

B. What is the Strengthening Families Approach?

The Strengthening Families approach was developed by the Center for Study of Social Policy (CSSP) as a feasible, systematic way to impact large numbers of children and families before abuse or neglect occurred. In 2001, Strengthening Families was launched with an emphasis on early care and education programs, building on that sector's relationships with both children and families. Since then, Strengthening Families' partners have expanded in both number and type of organization.

As a result of their research and conversations with practitioners in child welfare, family support and early childhood, CSSP identified five positive attributes - referred to as Protective Factors - which are linked to lower incidence of child abuse and neglect. The Protective Factors are:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Children's social and emotional development

Research has demonstrated that when these Protective Factors are present and robust, the occurrence of child abuse and neglect is significantly reduced. By providing parents with "what they need to parent effectively, even under stress," the Protective Factors help keep families strong. This strategy for dealing with child neglect and abuse shows great promise because:

- It works.
- It is cost effective. Activities that build the Protective Factors can be incorporated into existing programs and systems - such as early childhood education and child welfare, at little cost.
- There is high interest in preventing abuse. A National Association for the Education of Young Children survey showed that 97 percent of responding programs wanted to do more to prevent child maltreatment.⁴

C. Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI)

In 2004, CSPP solicited proposals from states throughout the country to pilot Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education, a child abuse prevention strategy based on the Protective Factors. Proposals from Illinois and six other states were selected. In 2005, the IDCFS convened more than 20 collaborative partner organizations and state agencies, child welfare, child abuse prevention, family support, early childhood education as well as parents and community leaders to promote the protective factors across systems and settings. Now known as Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI), the collaboration has doubled in size, drawing members from over 40 agencies, State departments and parent leaders. The collaboration continues to be chaired by the director of IDCFS and its work is currently guided by the Strengthening Families Illinois Strategic Plan 2009-2014.

The overall purpose of SFI is to prevent child abuse and neglect and to promote the health and well-being of children and families by working with child care centers and child welfare agency staff to incorporate evidence-based protective factors in early childhood services and systems statewide.

Collaborative partners advance the mission of SFI by:

- Incorporating the Strengthening Families approach into their work;
- Contributing financial resources to the collaboration;
- Promoting an understanding of the Strengthening Families approach through their communications including but not limited to publications and conferences; and
- Dedicating staff time to serve on the SFI Leadership Team and various workgroups.

SFI structure includes a Leadership Team, Work Groups, and the full collaborative. The Strengthening Families Leadership Team is chaired by the Director of IDCFS and consists of one executive level representative from each of the partner organizations, the chairs of Strengthening Families Work Groups, senior staff of DCFS, the lead from each of the pilot sites, and five parent representatives.

The following offers a brief description of the SFI Work Groups:

- *Building Resiliency Work Group*

This Work Group advises and supports SFI on building the capacity of early childhood centers to effectively address mental health issues in children and adults, to mitigate the impact of trauma on young children, and to promote children's social and emotional well-being. In addition, this Work Group has been key to integrating the building resiliency efforts of SFI, IDCFS, and the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership.

The recommendation to add a sixth Protective Factor on Healthy Parent Child Relationships emerged from this Work Group, as did support for the development of the "Understanding Trauma and Children's Exposure to Violence" curriculum.

- *Evaluation Work Group*

This Work Group is charged with documenting the impact of the Strengthening Families approach on childcare centers, child welfare agency staff, and families. Among its accomplishments are the development of Learning Network reporting forms, and staff and parent questionnaires. SFI Parent Café evaluations show very positive responses, with 99 percent of participants reporting that the cafes were helpful and 87 percent indicating the intent to change their behavior based on information shared at a Parent Café.

This Work Group is currently assessing the impact of SFI on early childhood centers.

- *Professional Development and Training Work Group*

The Professional Development Work Group advises and supports SFI by developing high quality professional development topics that support the implementation of Strengthening Families. Recognizing both the importance of collaboration between the child welfare and early learning communities, and the need for participants from each discipline to learn about the other, the Professional Development and Training Work Group recommended that training be developed to deal specifically with the importance of collaborative relationships. Most SFI training sessions are designed to accommodate persons from both disciplines. Attachment I includes examples of two SFI training descriptions provided by the Midwest Learning Center for Family Support.

This Work Group also advises SFI on the accessibility of training opportunities for early childhood professionals, child welfare staff, and parents; offers guidance to the Midwest Learning Center for Family Support as they develop SFI training modules; and contribute to the quality assurance system for SFI training.

D. Impact of SFI on Policies and Practices

The implementation of SFI has triggered policy and practice changes within IDCFS and among SFI partners. This section summarizes four areas where change has occurred, including:

1. **School Readiness Approach** involves a policy change within IDCFS and increased collaboration with early education sector;
2. **SFI Learning Networks** include early education programs that have made a substantial commitment to ongoing professional development and collaboration with IDCFS;
3. **Parent Leadership in Communities** changes how SFI partners engage with parents and the role of parents working with SFI partners;
4. **Family Advocacy Centers**, while funded by IDCFS, have empowered families as they navigate the child welfare system.

The scope of SFI is far broader than these four areas. The following is intended to highlight the impact of SFI on various stakeholders and the depth of the collaboration makes this approach so exciting.

1. School Readiness Initiative

Illinois was the first state in the country to require that all children between three and five years of age in the foster care system be enrolled in and attend a quality early learning program. This mandate for early education set IDCFS apart from most jurisdictions, the policy and planning decisions leading to its implementation were as innovative as the mandate.

IDCFS redefined early education as an “educational entitlement” for young children rather than a support service for employed foster parents. As such, enrollment has been targeted to Head Start, Pre-K and nationally accredited early care and education programs. These programs tend to be better equipped to promote school readiness among young children, including those who have experienced the trauma of abuse and/or neglect. It should be noted that the IDCFS

definition of “school readiness” was framed broadly and included “the social, emotional and cognitive well being of young children.”

IDCFS also recognized that the benefits of high quality early education are achieved when participation is stable and consistent over time. Therefore, caseworkers are urged to consider sustaining the child’s participation in the early education program when changes in foster care placement or permanency surface. When change is absolutely necessary, caseworkers and teachers are expected to assist children with the transition process.

Once early education became a required component of the IDCFS service plan for children between three and five years of age, caseworkers were responsible for children being enrolled in and attending such programs. “Does Not Apply” is no longer an acceptable entry in the education field of a young child’s service plan.

Child welfare agencies and the early childhood community began shifting their practices well before the mandate was announced. In fact, the following activities were undertaken to build support for the early education mandate:

1. All deputy directors were engaged and support was enlisted to promote the importance of the early education message.
2. A needs assessment was conducted to determine what frontline caseworkers needed to place children in quality early education programs.
3. The child welfare training department was enlisted to develop desk aids, an implementation manual and related training.
4. Key messages and documents regarding the importance of early education were developed and disseminated by IDCFS internally and to foster parents.
5. State child care, Head Start and Education departments drafted guidelines for caseworkers to facilitate the placement of children in high quality early education programs.
6. Early education was added as a component of the education passport for foster children.
7. Stakeholders in the early education community were engaged and introduced to the IDCFS role as “parent” for wards and the intent to enroll children in high quality early education programs.
8. Collaborative agreements were established with Head Start and other high quality early learning programs to ensure children in the foster care system from birth to five had access and could be enrolled.
9. Foster parent councils were engaged and information of the importance of early education was shared. Potential problem areas such as transportation, scheduling, etc. were addressed.

By December 2004 when the Director of IDCFS announced that, within one year, all three to five year olds in foster care would be enrolled in high quality early education programs, the goal

was achievable. Front line workers had both the administrative tools and relationships with early learning programs needed to facilitate enrollment. Despite the shortage of subsidized spaces, caseworkers were largely successful in enrolling their young clients in high quality early education programs.

This work continues and is reflected in the SFI 2009-2014 Strategic Plan. In addition to ensuring that 100 percent of children in the foster care system attend quality early learning programs, Program Level Outcomes include:

1. Increase the number of early childhood providers incorporating Strengthening Families
2. Caseworkers and early childhood program staff collaborate in service planning for children in the child welfare system

The SFI Project Director described IDCFS' success at enrolling preschool age foster children in high quality early education programs. She noted however, that the IDCFS and SFI are still struggling with how to best serve infants and toddlers in the child welfare system. While the primary developmental task for this age group is bonding and attachment, young children in the child welfare system are also faced with the impact of trauma.

2. SFI Learning Networks

Six SFI Learning Networks were launched between 2005 and 2006. Each network included an early education center that served as the "hub" with seven to ten early childhood education centers participating in the network. By 2010, the number of Networks had increased to 14; and over 100 early childhood programs were participating in networks throughout Illinois. The SFI Learning Networks are the mechanism used to embed the Strengthening Families approach in early education programs, to promote ongoing collaboration with local child welfare staff, and to increase parent engagement.

SFI Learning Network members participate in training and professional development opportunities and monthly peer to peer network meetings, complete the Strengthening Families self assessment, and develop action plans to help strengthen their practice and strategies focused on building strong relationships with parents.

3. Parent Leadership in Communities

The *Love Is Not Enough* (LINE) campaign is a parent-led effort aimed at keeping families strong. The campaign, which is sponsored by SFI, addresses the challenges that confront parents and offers a variety of ways for parents to connect, share ideas and get involved. While the campaign advances an understanding of the protective factors, parents advising the project believed that information on the protective factors needed to be communicated in more straightforward language. Better World Advertising worked with parents to "translate" the Protective Factors. The following chart shows the LINE campaign messages and the corresponding Protective Factors.

Love is Not Enough (LINE) Campaign Messages	Protective Factors
Be strong and flexible	Parental Resilience
Parents need friends	Social Connections
Being a great parent is part natural and part learned	Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
We all need help sometimes	Concrete Support in Times of Need
Parents need to help their children communicate	Social and Emotional Competence of Children
Give your children the love and respect they need	Healthy Parent – Child Relationships

The LINE campaign uses Parent Cafés to connect with parents, foster friendships, and introduce the Protective Factors. Building on the World Café model,⁵ Parent Cafés aim to tap into the collective wisdom available in every community to support parents and prevent child abuse and neglect. Conducted in a safe and supportive environment, all participants are encouraged to contribute to the conversation and to listen as others share their insights. Recent Parent Cafés were conducted as a series of three sessions:

- Parent Café 1 – Taking Care of Yourself
- Parent Café 2 – Being a Strong Parent
- Parent Café 3 – Building a Strong Relationship with Your Children

SFI reports that more than 87 percent of Parent Café participants have reported learning something about each of the Protective Factors and intend to change their behavior based on that information.⁶ Parent Cafés are frequently a parent's first formal contact with SFI. Parents may choose to participate in one or more Parent Cafés, pursue training to serve as a Parent Café Host, engage as a SFI Active Parent Leader or become a part of the SFI Core Parent Leadership. SFI also invites parents to be a part of the Keep Your Family Strong online Facebook community.

Ongoing work in this area is reflected in the SFI 2009-2014 Strategic Plan. Goal 3 states, "Promote Parent Leadership in Family-Serving Systems." Program level outcomes related to this goal include:

1. 1,000 parent leaders in regional networks are trained to deliver SFI LINE Parent Cafés and parent leadership training; and
2. Providers are fostering parent leadership intentionally.

4. Family Advocacy Centers

In 2004, IDCFS established the first Family Advocacy Center (FAC) in Bloomington, Illinois. The purpose of this FAC is to provide advocacy and support to parents outside of the formal child welfare system. IDCFS recognized that community-based organizations are well

positioned to reach families before they come into the child welfare system and are often better able to establish trusting relationships with families involved in the system.

Today, there are 15 FACs operating throughout the state. FACs are located in areas with the highest IDCFS intake rates and are operated by a variety of community and/or faith-based organizations. The following chart is an example of an organization serving as a FAC.

Family Advocacy in Champaign County	
<p align="center">Mission Statement</p> <p>To empower families through advocacy to understand their role and responsibilities in the child welfare system. To engage families in active participation in service interventions so families can obtain the necessary skills to build stronger families.</p> <p>To provide families with assistance on how to navigate through the child welfare system and empower them to become the driving force in their case.</p> <p>It is our belief with this power shift, families will be respected as the change agent on their case and ultimately the change agent in their lives.</p>	
Services provided by Family Advocacy in Champaign County include:	
Child Welfare Advocacy	Professional Mentoring
Mediation	Workshops
Community Outreach	Education Equity
Health Promotion	Strategic Planning

E. IDCFS and SFI

IDCFS and SFI share a commitment to the Strengthening Families approach. IDCFS has worked diligently to embed the Protective Factors into its system. SFI has focused its efforts on embedding the Strengthening Families approach in the early childhood sector and engaging parents in this process. The success of this collaboration appears related to the participants' efforts to keep the focus on protecting children by strengthening and supporting families.

IDCFS has continued to refine its practice model to include Trauma-Informed, Strengths-Based, Family-Centered Practice. The Strengthening Families approach and promotion of the Protective Factors has contributed to and supported this evolution.

F. Implementing SF in Los Angeles County

IDCFS and Strengthening Families Illinois have made substantial progress in integrating the Strengthening Families approach and the Protective Factors into their work with children and families. Clearly some aspects of SFI could – with sufficient will – be replicated wholesale in Los Angeles County. Other aspects will require modifications to reflect our geography, population, political realities and provider communities. The most important lesson that SFI offers is - that with hard work and strong leadership – change is possible.

Recommendations for Consideration by Your Board:

▪ ***Integrating the Strengthening Families Approach into Our Work***

1. Direct the Policy Roundtable for Child Care (Roundtable) and the Chief Executive Office to serve as the contact point for County efforts to integrate Strengthening Families into their work with children, families and communities.
2. Instruct the County departments represented on the Roundtable to integrate Strengthening Families into their work with children and families, within existing resources, and to report their progress to the Roundtable for inclusion in the regularly scheduled Roundtable reports to the Board.

The following departments are represented on the Roundtable:

- Chief Executive Office
 - Children and Family Services
 - Mental Health
 - Parks and Recreation
 - Public Health
 - Public Social Services
 - Probation
3. Charge the Roundtable and CEO to work collaboratively with other established or emerging Strengthening Families efforts within the County including the Education Coordinating Council (ECC), LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment, Magnolia Place and First 5 LA.

▪ ***Communicating the Strengthening Families Message***

4. Direct Roundtable members to work collaboratively with the CEO Public Affairs and Multimedia, Cable and Telecommunications Offices, and where possible, philanthropic organizations to:
 - Craft consistent Strengthening Families messages for use across departments, and
 - Explore how social media and innovative technologies can assist County departments in communicating with client families.

▪ ***Changing Practice***

5. Encourage County departments working with children and families who are living in poverty, exposed to mental health issues, and/or under the child welfare system to mitigate these risk factors by promoting participation in high quality early education programs.
 - a. Direct the Roundtable, ECC, DCFS and representatives of the early education community to develop a plan to target the enrollment of at least 90 percent of young DCFS children under the age of six—and the children of DCFS and probation youth—in high-quality, subsidized early care and education programs where space is available by the close of 2014. This plan will necessarily include

strategies to maximize the use of subsidized child development services available in the County.

- b. Request the ECC to support DCFS efforts to enroll young children under their supervision in high quality early learning programs by:
 - i. Working with DCFS to modify caregiver agreements, where possible, to include a requirement to enroll children in high quality early education programs.
 - ii. Working with the Dependency Court to encourage that Court Minute Orders related to children between three and five years of age include enrollment in high quality early education programs.
- c. Instruct the Roundtable to convene representatives of DCFS, ECC, early childhood programs, Los Angeles County Office of Education, Zero to Three, WestEd, and the Children's Court to develop policy recommendations to guide the use of early education services for children birth to three years of age. These recommendations will be included in the July 2012 Roundtable report to the Board of Supervisors.
- d. Direct DPSS to ensure that families receiving CalWORKs Stage 1 Child Care are informed of the importance of early education and the full range of child development programs.
- e. Direct DPSS, the Roundtable and the local child care resource and referral agencies to develop strategies to inform families exempted from CalWORKs work requirements because of the age or number of young children in the family, of the subsidized child development programs for which their children may be eligible.

¹ Erwin McEwen, "Strengthening Families Leadership Summit-Los Angeles," November 10, 2010.

² Op. cit., McEwen, November 10, 2010.

³ Children's Bureau discussion of its child abuse prevention initiatives at <http://www.all4kids.org/prevention.html>.

⁴ About Strengthening Families, is available at <http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net/index.php/about>.

⁵ Information on the World Café and the Café process is available at <http://www.theworldcafe.com>.

⁶ Illinois: State Approach Profile, Center for the Study of Social Policy at www.strengtheningfamilies.net.